Potential for Setting up a Protected Area and Prospects for Ecotourism Development in Upper Svaneti

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On September 18, EWMI ACCESS organized a multi-stakeholder meeting in Mestia (Svaneti) between CSOs, local government representatives (including the mayor of Mestia Municipality) and the residents of Mestia, Nakra, Chuberi and Khaishi villages. Purpose of the meeting was to discuss some of the pressing local problems, including sustainable use of forests, land ownership, and tourism development.

This year, the Tbilisi-based CSO *Green Alternative*, with the support of EWMI ACCESS, evaluated the feasibility of setting up the protected area in the lower zone of Upper Svaneti (Idliani, Khaishi, Chuberi, and Nakra communities). This territory is the most wooded area in Mestia municipality. Historically, these forests were under communal ownership and sustainable timber harvesting has been practiced there for centuries. The population still depends largely on timber resources obtained in the forests. Nowadays, the state neither recognizes the communal ownership, nor proposes a model for sustainable forest management in this area that would comply with local knowledge and land use traditions. Given the current situation and considering international best practice, *Green Alternative* believes that establishing a Protected Area with Sustainable Use of Natural Resources (IUCN Category VI) will provide the most optimal management model.

This concept was discussed with the meeting participants in Mestia. After consultations with communities, *Green Alternative* will propose this initiative to decision-makers.

Eco-tourism was another major topic of the discussion. Representative of the *Georgian Ecotourism Association* spoke at length about the benefits of ecotourism as compared to other types of tourism, and explained to the residents how to use existing resources to develop attractive ecotourism products. Interested citizens also received private consultations on this issue. Members of the *Georgian Young Lawyers' Association,* and *Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC)* provided legal consultations on property rights for interested citizens.

Media portal *Mountain News* and journalists from Tbilisi also attended the meeting to share their experiences and build contacts with the local communities. The head of *Mountain News* talked extensively about his work with communities in the mountainous regions of Eastern Georgia and advocacy campaigns carried out to solve




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problems there. He also discussed topics for future cooperation with Svaneti residents.

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